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HOW I CAME TO BE AN OLD MAID.

By Alice Cary.



WHY don't you get married?" my friends used often to say to me; latterly, since the white hairs begin to shine through the brown along my temples, and a long-ago sorrowful struggle has worked itself into lines along my forehead, they generally say: "Why *didn't* you get married?"

I have taxed my imagination sadly to make answer to these inquiries, and one time and another have told a great many stories, for which, by-the-way, I have never had a melancholy conscience for an hour. These fabrications have been harmless, and have not only served to amuse my listener, but also to fill up and smooth off various little sections of time that would else have been laid in the great wall of the past, jagged and uncomely enough.

I wish I had no worse sins to answer for.

A few nights ago I offered the subjoined apology—it might have been true, every word of it; my listener, Mrs. Robinson, believed it; I am sure she did, for twice I heard her sigh, and once I thought I saw her wipe her eyes, albeit she is not given to the melting mood. We have come to be very good friends, though we are not on the same "plane," and in all human probability never shall be. She is married, fat, comfortable, and respectable. I, of course, am none of these things; being an *old maid*, how could I be?

When I first began to afford a carriage once or twice a year, and make out a list of people who *must* be called on, her name was set down among the rest. She was of the few whom I was sure of finding *at home*, and she never kept my carriage (at a *dollar an hour*) waiting long at the door, but came down at once in a dress of black silk, trimmed with flounces, usually, a coiffure of lace and flowers, wearing ear-rings as big as the half-moon, and a watch with a great many *charms* and other showy appendages.

It was her pleasant custom to hope I was well, to beg I would take the easy chair, and to inquire what was new in literature. She knew I was the New-York correspondent of a Western newspaper, and the last question was simply complimentary—put on the ground of disinter-

ested benevolence, purely, and having demeaned herself of this polite obligation to me, she glided naturally into her own affairs, and the remainder of my limited time with her (I was always limited on these occasions) was filled up with talk of the baby who was teething, the oldest girl who was taking French and music lessons, and of the exceeding difficulty of finding a cook who would not quarrel with the chambermaid.

Then she would hope she should see more of me in future, say something about the day, to get me out on, bow, and smile, and that was the last of Mrs. Robinson for some months, when she would return my call, ask me what was new in literature, and so repeat her familiar staple of conversation.

At length she came into our block, and asked me to her house once or twice "very sociably"—in short, when one of the children had a birthday party, and she invited her sister Nancy from the country, uncle John, from Indiana, who happened to be in town "buying goods," and one or two plainish neighbors. Gradually it came about that she borrowed our silver teaspoons and candlesticks on festive occasions, with, perhaps, a little extra china and a dozen or two of forks; also, now and then, in some exigency of housekeeping, our bed-key and hammer. So Mrs. Robinson and I are excellent friends, for, after all, these trifles are the stuff that friendship is made of.

But to my apology. It was that visionary slip of time between sunset and night; there was a circle of shining warmth about the hearth, within which I had drawn my chair, and with my baby nephew on my knee was going

"Trot, trot to Boston
To buy a little cake!"

when our remarkable journey was interrupted by Mrs. Robinson, who, with a great coil of white net about her head, red-faced, and out of breath, had just run in for a few minutes.

When she had arranged the blower so as to send the heat up chimney, and exclaimed, between the heavings of her stifled bosom, that my room was a great deal too warm, she kissed the dimpled hands and red mouth of my little pet, and asked, with a direct earnestness that appealed to my sincerity:

"Why *didn't* you ever get married? Just think what a delight it would be if such a beautiful child as this was yours!"

"Yes," I said, "if its father was mine too."

"What?" and Mrs. Robinson stared at me terribly.

She had not received my meaning, and I explained that love should go before children; that *they* were not a primary need of nature, as love was, but an outgrowth from it.

She shook her head dubiously, and answered: "Well, that isn't telling me why you never got married!"

"'Twas only throwing words away,"

I saw, to talk to Mrs. Robinson of love and marriage as I understood them, for an "eligible match" is not marriage in my creed; so I sloped the wing of my philosophy down to "easy things to understand," and said: "You know, Mrs. Robinson, I 'was younger once than I am now;' well, it happened that I invested all my affections at one desperate hazard—I lost; in the wide world I had nothing anywhere to fall back upon, and here I am, all my friends my creditors to a great amount; I never shall pay them in this world, for the worst of my venture is, that I am since poor in love for everything. One true affection is a nucleus about which thousands may gather and be kept fast, but lacking that, even friendships are feeble and desultory. You must not blame me too much, I have done the best I could; the tree that is dead at the heart will never blossom well, nor bear perfect fruit."

Mrs. Robinson looked puzzled and curious. She wanted to know all about it, she said; where the wicked man was, and whether I had not got over the disappointment, and if I did not think such villains deserved to be hanged. She hoped, at least, he was poor, and had a wife as cross and homely as she could be.

"On the contrary," said I, "she is rich and pretty, or was when he married her; they thrive, and, as the world goes, are people to be envied."

"Won't you have this chair?" said Mrs. Robinson, rising from the rocker, and speaking in soft, pitiful tones, as one does to a mourner.

"Ah, it was a long time ago," I replied, "and I rocked myself into quietude years since."

After a little contemplative silence, Mrs. Robinson remarked that she "supposed we quarreled, as all lovers did, and that one or the other of us was too proud to make up."

"No," said I, "we never quarreled at all; there is nothing in all our acquaintance, except one little incident, that is not beautiful and sweet to remember."

"Then how could it have happened?" exclaimed my friend.

"He was the village pastor; I one of his flock—a young rustic girl, undeveloped, imperfectly understanding myself, and altogether incapable of making myself understood by anybody, much less by one so much my superior in culture and worldly wisdom as he was.

"Did you ever see a sharp thunder-storm in the country? We never feel the fearful impressiveness of a storm in the city, but in the country it is as if God spoke to us directly from the clouds. I remember one very distinctly, for it blackly underlies my acquaintance with our village pastor.

"It was harvest-time; the day so sultry and close that not a leaf stirred on the cherry-tree at the door; the earth was baked and cracked; the corn-blades shriveled; the rosebushes heavy with dust, and the grass in the high ground of the pasture-fields white and brittle as stubble. For two nights there had fallen no dew, and everybody was crying out for rain. A dozen times that day little Cyrus Bates, the sturdy boy of our oldest workhand, had been to the well for water. Every time, I noticed, he poised the bucket on the curb and drank from it with manly pride, as the older hands did; then he filled the yellow-hooped cedar pail which he carried to the field, full to the brim, and bore it along with a steady hand, his bare, and brier-scratched feet crushing the stubble beneath them defiantly. It was nearly night the last time he came for water, and as he went up the hill toward the level where all hands were busy, some cocking the hay, others raking it into windrows and loading it into the expanded "rigging," I noticed that a sudden gust took off his straw hat, and having whirled it up into the air, carried it half across the field. We had hardly time to say 'there would be rain,' before the leaves of the cherry trees trembled and shook and turned their faces together, while the aspen and locust trees grew white with turning their leaves inside out. Whirlwinds of dust began to chase each other along the high road; the teamster cracked his whip and trotted his horses up hill. The air blackened, and in five minutes the rugged pyramids of blue clouds that had

been piled along the west all day, dissolved and ran over half the sky.

"Directly came a sharp flash that made us put our hands to our eyes, and a rattling burst of thunder that made us shrink into ourselves. The last gleam of natural light was snuffed out in an instant, and all was lurid and terrible. The shutters flapped round, the dog came crouching and whining to the door, the heifer turned her forehead to the sky, and the bull lashed his sides, pawed up the dust, and bellowed back to the thunder; the colts galloped out of the hedge-row, and with heads lifted high, and dilating nostrils, looked one at another.

"I saw little Cyrus running to catch his hat, and saw him stop under the black walnut tree, on the hill-top.

"We shut our eyes again, for the heaven above our heads seemed cracked and smashed together; the dust began to dimple with great warm drops that fell fast and faster; the trees writhed and twisted in their wrestle with the strong wind. The eave-ducts ran over, the cistern filled full and overflowed, and all the dooryard grass and flowers were washed flat, under the channels of sudden rivers.

"The thunder broke a little less near, and rolled and tumbled down the sky and muttered awfully to itself. Bucketfuls of water had driven under the doors and in through the windows. When suddenly as it had come, the rain stopped, and the sun parted the wet clouds and looked out.

"From forks to roots the walnut tree was riven open, and one great branch hanging by a few twisted splinters. The team was coming down the meadow, sloping through pools, and cutting deep ruts in the sod; the oxen strained their necks out of the yoke as they drew forward the wet load that jutted over their backs and half buried them. The hands were walking close behind, but Cyrus was not among them. Perhaps he is on the load of hay, I thought; I looked up, he was there. One of the hands holding him against his bosom, and I knew, more by an instinctive perception than by the lifeless, backward dragging of the arm, that he was dead.

"They found him under the walnut tree, the handle of the rake he had used that day, fast in his hand.

"When the evening chores were done, I wiped away my tears, and went to watch, as was the custom, with the corpse of poor little Cyrus. I remember the very dress I wore—a checked gingham of pink and

white, with short sleeves and low neck. I thought it was very pretty at the time, and when I was ready could not help stopping to admire myself in the glass, notwithstanding the admonition of conscience that it was wicked to indulge worldly vanity at so solemn a time.

"I broke a bright rose from the bush at the gate as I went along, and slipped its stem under my belt.

"It was almost dark in the room where little Cyrus lay, for the candles were not yet lighted, and not till he came forward and gave me his hand did I see that the village pastor was there. I had never expected so much honor, for we were poor farming people, living quite out of the range of his pastoral visits, and the rumor ran that he was proud and exclusive in his associations.

"I discredited rumor that night, but I do not now. Character may be built at one side of the most obstinate pride, and at the other, of the gentlest humility; and whichever side is at first presented to us, makes an impression of completeness which we never afterward get quite rid of.

"He called me by name, saying he had long ago noticed my sad black eyes at church, and inquired me out.

"Oh, what comforting sweetness there was in his voice as he took the toil-hardened hand of the poor mourning mother in his, and repeated: 'Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.' When the wild turbulence of her grief was calmed, and she was sent away to the living children, who had need of her, he drew me to the window farthest from the dead, and talked of the many mansions in our Father's house; of the beautiful provisions of consolation for sorrow, and of the fitting responses all along through life to the needs of nature. It seemed to me that he was very wise and very eloquent. I felt drawn to him, he said for me so many things which I had thought and could not say, and showed me clearly so many truths of which I had hitherto seen only the shadows. I loved everything in nature—the fields, the flowers, the sunsets—but nothing had loved me back, and the first faint similitude of an answer to my life's demand was exceedingly precious.

"He was sorry, he said, that other duties would not permit him to remain in the house of mourning, where it was always good to be. But twilight deepened into night, and the stars came out with their

old magnificence of splendor, that always delights and astonishes, and still he went not. He would wait till some young people, who were expected, came; it would be too melancholy for one so little used to death as I, to be left alone with it.

"By-and-by the young people came, but they were so frivolous, he said, so thoughtless, so unlike me, it would be cruel to leave me to such companionship.

"I was flattered; how could I help being so? and as we always appear to best advantage when we are conscious of giving pleasure, I was, to say the least, less awkward, crippled, and embarrassed, than usual. At home, I went to bed almost with the birds; I had never in my life kept awake all night, and I could not now. I heard the midnight crowing, and I heard nothing else till the burst of bird-songs at daybreak awoke me.

"The pastor was gone. A shawl, belonging to one of the young watchers, was wrapt about my neck and tucked carefully over my bare arms. I knew instinctively who had done it, and also who had stolen the bright rose from beneath my belt.

"It was a luxury to breathe the air as I walked home across the fields that morning; exquisite to brush the dew from the grass, and delicious to smell the earth and feel the sunshine. It was as if I had been born into a new world; and so indeed I had.

"Our house came within the range of pastoral visits after that; in truth, the walk from the village to our home was a delightful recreation, and before the summer was gone, not a week passed without our having one or two calls from our kind clergyman.

"When the work was done I used to take my seat on the stone step of the door that looked toward the west, and watch the fading of the sunset, and the dropping of the birds in the lilacs, my heart all the while listening for the footsteps that I had learned to recognize afar off. Sometimes it would be quite dark before he would come, and I would have no pleasure in the grass at my feet, nor in the shining of the stars along the green wall of woods in the west. Suddenly, at the click of the gate-latch, the watch-dog, that was used to lie with his head on my knee, would run down the walk and whine his welcome. In a moment the old glory would be in the stars, the old brightness in the grass, and such a sweet tumult in my heart, as nothing under heaven, except the first dawning of love, can awaken.

"No matter what we talked about; every common thing was as interesting as if it had been only made just then, and we saw it for the first time.

"When he came early, or when the moon lighted up the orchard with her full lamp, we sometimes went there, for the hill where the apple-trees grew commanded a fine prospect—the village with its curling smokes and window-lights, quiet glimpses of farmhouses in their setting of dooryard trees, the stone mill, the red schoolhouse, and the dusty highroad, cutting the green fields and winding along the hills, up and up, till it seemed to end in the sky.

"The birds would go to bed in the boughs above us, and after a little twitter and stir, only the noises of insects would disturb the leafy hush, save now and then when the farmers' boys called to one another, or the tinkling bell of some belated leader of his flock broke through the silence.

"Sometimes the strong arm of my companion would help me over a rut, or across the run, and afterward it was sure to keep its place about my waist till our path struck into the window-lights of home.

"When the leaves began to grow yellow, and the katydids to sing, we still sat on the doorstep; and as the night air grew chilly my shawl would be wrapt about me very tenderly, and all those needless cares and fearless fears, manifested, which, above all things, women prize.

"One night, when some slight accident had bruised my hand, he took it softly between his and fondled and kissed it, ending his pretty petting, as he took leave of me, with a kiss on my cheek.

"After that, he never came nor went without that fine expression of endearment, compared with which language is poor indeed.

"Every Sunday I sat in church, and word by word dropped into my heart and stayed there, not because of its excellence or eloquence, but because he said it. I found meanings in sentences and looks that no one else could find or see, and sat in my place with my little secret, as close to heaven as any austere worshipper of them all.

"Winter nights came, but often when the snow fell fastest, or when the wind was sharpest, the pastor came too, and we sat by the fire, sometimes, till near midnight, I, at least, very happy.

"He read to me, sometimes those fine

poems of the Bible, so wondrously bright with sacred splendor, sometimes the inspirations of later bards; and often, in lines of peculiar sweetness, he put so much personal feeling that he seemed but expressing his own sentiment in borrowed language, or rather, reading from his heart. Tone, glance, everything, said '*you and I*, but he never said it in any more direct way, though thus indirectly he told me many, many times that he loved me; thus he praised my eyes, my hair—my mouth he praised in a yet sweeter way. And so all the winter nights came and went, and though I had had a thousand nameless intimations of affection, there was no defined basis on which to rest my hopes.

"I was much younger than he, else I should have drawn from all this an inference fatal to my peace. When it was intimated that our pastor was too proud, too finely accomplished to marry among us, my heart only hardened toward those who thus maligned him, and gave him the more tenderness, the more devotion, until in him I had invested the whole treasure of my affection.

"Gradually his manner changed toward me; his visits were less frequent, and he varied suddenly from gay carelessness to a solemn and almost pitiful interest; he avoided the old themes, and conversed on matters of general interest.

"When I rallied him for neglect of me, he replied, flatteringly, that his conduct was dictated by the necessity of self-defence; and when I would not be satisfied with jesting, he told me that he was about to leave his dear people for a season, and that he could not break off without some preparatory discipline the '*friendship*' which had given him the best pleasure of his life. I inquired if transient separation from his people involved that necessity. The tears were in my eyes, and my voice was not quite steady, I believe.

"I do not remember all he said, but I know he kissed me, called me his dear little pet, excused himself for leaving me at an early hour, on the plea of a business engagement, and left me with no better satisfaction than the promise of a long and confidential interview before his departure.

"I waited for that final visit as the criminal waits the coming in of the jury when his trial is ended. He came at last, not as I expected, but in company with one of the deacons of his church; in short, it was a brief family visit, no intimation, by look or word, that I was any more to

him than was my father, who gave him his honest hand in tearful confidence.

"Before Christmas he would be with us again, and the joy of meeting would more than make amends for this momentary sorrow!

"But love believes all things, as well as hopes all things; I knew that no land nor sea could divide me long from him, and I was sure he would come back. I did not consider that I was to be subjected, not only to the trial of absence, but also to the comparison with women who wore their accomplishments and graces as naturally as I my rustic frock. I did not know, that taken out of my customary surrounding, the little charm I had would fall away, and I appear to humiliating and awkward disadvantage.

"After two or three months I received a letter from our pastor, beginning, 'My dear friend,' and ending with 'Your affectionate pastor.' He described some fine scenery that had come under his observation; told me of some celebrated persons he had met; dwelt a good deal on the toil, and care, and vanity of this life; alluded to the pleasant memories connected with his sojourn among us, and finally hoped he should see, on his return, the roses of my cheeks brighter than ever, and that I would have found what I eminently deserved—the best husband in the world!

"There vanished my castle; there my heart, that had dissolved to tenderness in his smile, grew cold and hard, and I judge, since, of men and things, through my intellect alone."

"Oh, that was too bad!" cried Mrs. Robinson, between indignation and tears. "What became of the fellow after all?"

"He asked a dismissal from his charge before long, and soon afterward married an accomplished woman—an heiress, I believe, and never came back among us. He is a citizen of this great metropolis, in which we are, living in retired elegance and leisure—an admired and influential gentleman; I a poor old maid. So the world goes!"

Mrs. Robinson wound her head-dress low about her eyes. She believed every word I had spoken, and when she took leave, she pressed my hand very tenderly, and insisted that I should drop in upon her often of evenings, and take a cup of tea or play a game of whist—she was almost always at home, and would be so happy to see me.

NOTES FROM THE STUDY.

By O. J. Victor



AMONG all the creations of Byron, none are more perfect than his Sardanapalus and Myrrha. It is generally urged, by critics, that the poet was destitute of real originality, because all his active characters—Childe Harold, Manfred, Cain, Lara, Lucifer, Conrad, have the same impress and peculiarities of nature—are one and the same person. This is, in part, true. The fever which preyed upon Byron's soul wrought only misanthropy, cynicism, and defiance of man; and his dramas all mould themselves to depict this one passion. But there seems an exception to this estimate: the characters of Sardanapalus and his Greek Slave, have little of the likeness of Harold and Inez—of Conrad and Medora—of Selim and Zuleika—of Cain and Adah; they stand out, if not as originals, at least as very striking and thrilling actors, whose drama we follow to its close with the most absorbing interest. Sardanapalus is a princely voluptuary—a kingly epicure, who unites the strangely antagonistic qualities of heroic bravery and a love of ease—of scorn of all control and utter devotion to his voluptuous desires; while Myrrha, his Ionian slave, is a beautiful creature, gifted with courage and devotion beyond her sex, whose heart is wrapt up in the intensity of its love for the epicurean king. From the beginning to the end of the drama we follow the scenes with the eagerness of a wild curiosity; and when, at its close, we let the curtain fall as the heroic woman lights the funeral pyre upon which Sardanapalus and his Slave are to mingle their ashes, we feel that Byron has wrought two characters which are too beautiful and original to be forgotten.

Among the many fine passages of "Sardanapalus," we are particularly pleased with the following exquisite scene:

SARD.— Thou art very fair,
But what I seek of thee is love—not safety.

MYR.—And without love where dwells security?

SARD.—I speak of woman's love.

MYR.— The very first
Of human life must spring from woman's breast;
Your first small words were taught you from her lips;

Your first tears quenched by her, and your last sighs

Too often breathed out in woman's hearing,

When men have shrunk from the ignoble care

Of watching the last hour of the stricken.

SARD.—My eloquent Ionian! thou speakest music!

The very chorus of the tragic song

I have heard thee talk of as the favorite pastime

Of thy far father-land. Nay, weep not—calm thee.

MYR.—I weep not. But I pray thee do not speak About my fathers or their land.

SARD.— Yet oft

Thou speakest of them.

MYR.— True—true! Constant thought

Will overflow in words unconsciously;

But when another speaks of Greece it wounds me."

These old and oft-quoted lines:

"Though deep, yet clear though gentle, yet not dull;

Strong without rage; without o'erflowing, full,"

are from Sir John Denham's "Cooper's Hill" view of the Thames river. Pope generally has credit for the couplet. From a recent sanitary report regarding the pestilential condition of the said river, we should infer that Sir John Denham's Thames was now a myth. Who would infer, from the constant mention of the Thames, that it was a stream of less length and body of water than the Licking creek, in Ohio? Our Ohio or Mississippi rivers would swallow it up as readily as a "big pickerel" would put away a minnow.

William Habington (1560, 1647) wrote, among other fine things, the poem to Night—the first stanza of which reads:

"When I survey the bright
Celestial sphere,
So rich with jewels hung, that Night
Doth like an Ethiop bride appear."

This sublime figure is somewhat modified by Shakspeare, in the noted exclamation of Romeo:

"O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of Night,
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear:
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear."

Beside this imagery, Morloe's invocation is rather tame, though beautiful when viewed apart:

"Fair, eldest child of love, thou Spotless Night!
Empress of Silence and the queen of Sleep;
Who, with thy black cheek's pure complexion,
Makest lovers' eyes enamored of thy beauty."